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AUTHOR Hampton, Peter J.
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ABSTRACT

This paper reports some of the conclusions arrived at during a five-week Educational Provisions Development Act Training Program for teachers of low-income and minority students at the University of Akron. At that time, the contention that disadvantaged college students need affective recognition as well as cognitive recognition if they are to succeed in college was tested. The student body was made up of 36 compensatory education teachers culled from different parts of the country. The basic objective in the training program was to share professional experiences in compensatory teaching, and in so doing, extricate and collate the most useful and the most innovative strategies, with respect to both rationale and methodology, for teaching academically disadvantaged college students. The program was divided into four major areas of probing: the communications skill area--English and mathematics; the generic subject matter area--the natural sciences and social studies; and the developmental counseling area and the intra- and interpersonal relations area. As the participants met from day to day in discussion, the strategies discussed in the paper were agreed to represent, among others, the most significant, innovative, and useful approaches in teaching academically disadvantaged college students. (Author/JM)

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INNOVATIVE TECHNIQUES IN TEACHING ACADEMICALLY DISADVANTAGED COLLEGE STUDENTS

By Peter J. Hampton, Ph.D.
The University of Akron

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The trend in teaching disadvantaged college students today involves more and more emphasis upon the establishment of affective relationships between students and teacher and between students themselves.

It is obviously important to strengthen the disadvantaged students' cognitive domain. He needs improvement in reading, verbal expression, writing and listening skills. He needs improvement in math skills; he needs to increase his store of subject matter information; and he needs to sharpen his cognitive styles of reasoning - his skills of inducing, deducing, educing, inferring.

But more important than this is to strengthen the disadvantaged student's affective domain. For without strength here, he cannot establish adequate cognitive communications. The disadvantaged college student needs to experience an interplay of feelings and emotions; he needs a great deal of attention, approval and acceptance; he needs freer play for his imagination, greater respect for his sensitivities, and more opportunity for affect communications that are need satisfying.

Recently, when we conducted a 5-week EPDA Training Program for Teachers of Low-Income and minority students at The University of Akron, we had occasion to put to test the contention that disadvantaged college students need affective recognition as well as cognitive recognition if they are to succeed in college.

Our student body was made up of 36 compensatory education teachers culled from different parts of the country. Our staff was made up of a director, six instructors and two program assistants, all of whom had extensive experience teaching disadvantaged college students. Our basic objective in the Training Program was to share professional experiences in compensatory teaching, and in so doing, extricate and collate the most useful and the most innovative strategies, with respect to both rationale and methodology, for teaching academically disadvantaged college students.

We divided our program into four major areas of probing: The communications skill area - English and mathematics; the generic subject matter area - the natural sciences and the social studies; the developmental counseling area and the intra and interpersonal relations area. And as we met from day to day in discussion, we gradually came to agreement that the following strategies, stated as injunctions, represent, among others, the most significant, the most innovative, and the most useful approaches in teaching academically disadvantaged college students.

Know Your Students!

The disadvantaged student is different from other students. He may be different in economic, cultural and social background. Frequently he takes pride in being different. He may reject innovations to change his feelings, his attitudes, his ideas or his behavior, especially if the innovations are in line with the teacher's preconceived ideas. The disadvantaged student charges that we, his teachers, do not really understand him, because our feelings and conceptions are based on criteria which do not apply to him.

If this be so, then we, as teachers, must learn to bend. We must learn to know the disadvantaged student on his own terms - not ours. Our frame of reference must change. When we know, we can predict; when we don't know, we must observe and learn.

The only way to know the disadvantaged student is to diagnose him every day - constantly. This can be achieved by conceptual and non-conceptual means. We must test and interpret and learn to know the disadvantaged student better by means of the interpretations. In addition to the conventional relevant tests and measurements, we must make use of the role playing methods, the gaming methods, the encounter methods, and the body language methods. And all this in the cause of knowing the disadvantaged student as a person in his own right.

Teach Them Many Things!

In teaching disadvantaged students, we must teach for many objectives at once. A course in developmental English does not necessarily remain a course in English alone. It may become a course in human relations or a course in women's lib as well. It is next to impossible to departmentalize knowledge for the disadvantaged student. To do this successfully requires an expectation of ordered knowledge, built up over a period of time. And this we do not have in the disadvantaged student.

Moreover, not only must there be teaching of different kinds of knowledge at any one time, there must also be teaching of thinking, teaching of skills, and teaching of attitudes at the same time! The disadvantaged student is deficient in the abilities to abstract and to generalize. He finds it difficult to separate an idea from the application of that

idea. He has to be shown as well as told.

Each one of the multiple objectives in teaching the disadvantaged student requires a different teaching strategy. Factual information can be taught by lecture - by telling and by explaining. Thinking can only be taught by participation, by doing. Attitudes are taught by experience and feeling. While skills are taught by practice and by repetition in different fields of behavior.

Accept Heterogeneity in Your Students!

When we began formal developmental course work with disadvantaged college students at the University of Akron, we were disturbed about the heterogeneity of skills and subject matter knowledge that we found among students who enrolled in our courses. A four or five-year spread in English or math proficiency, for instance, was not unusual. Our first reaction to this problem was to introduce as much homogeneity of skills and information into our group as possible by sectioning. Starting out with 12 students per section on average, we soon found that our sections reduced to 4 or 6 students. Economically this became prohibitive, and so we had to go back to larger sections and the old heterogeneity in background information and skills.

By this time, however, we had discovered that heterogeneity in skill and subject matter background was actually a blessing-even though somewhat in disguise. We discovered that disadvantaged students who function at different levels of subject matter competence are much more willing to help each other in learning. By helping each other, students are able to reinforce their own skills and information and so build greater feeling of self confidence leading to stronger self conceptualization.

Our developmental courses and our cluster tutoring sections have thus become, in effect, teach-ins in which everybody participates. There are times when the students initiate and dominate discussions in the course and tutoring sessions. And this is good. Minimal structure in subject matter presentation and maximum informality provides opportunity for

creative thinking and emotional abreaction. Encounter under such circumstances can lead to catalytic solution of personal as well as academic problems.

The little red school house approach to teaching several grades at the same time demands a great deal of stamina, endurance and frustration tolerance from the teacher. This approach is not for the rigid, the compulsive or the perfectionist personality. But it is necessary if we are to allay anxiety and reinforce motivation to learn in the disadvantaged college student.

Learning tasks for disadvantaged students who perform on different levels of competence must be open-ended so that every student can respond in accordance with his needs, his perceptions, and his skills. To make this possible, the teacher must enlarge upon the materials and the methods to be used in teaching. Anchorage to a given text-book is taboo. The materials of learning must include films, tape recordings, stories and pictures. The method of learning must include experimentation, manipulation and observation; and the results of learning must provide for different ways of being right. There should be only a minimum of right or wrong answers.

Motivate Your Students Extrinsically!

Why should I go to college, the disadvantaged student asks. Because you'll get paid for it, we answer. Paid not only in the sense that you can learn a vocational skill, become more educated and so can enjoy the ideational and the sense-perceivable worlds in broader scope; but paid also in hard cash - paid in remission of tuition fees, board and lodging, paid in remission of pencils and paper and textbook expenses, and paid by a weekly participation stipend, and possibly a dependency allowance.

Which one of the two sets of rewards is more important as learning motivators to the disadvantaged college student? The first set which promises delayed satisfaction of important personal needs, or the second set, which provides for immediate personal gratification? The answer has to be the second set of incentives. To the disadvantaged student, what is relevant is the here and now. Placed on the Maslow hierarchy of needs, the disadvantaged student to begin with functions mostly on the first two levels - the level of keeping body and soul together, that is the physiological need satisfaction level, and the level of serving what has been personally aggrandized.

It is, therefore, immediate extrinsic motivation rather than delayed intrinsic motivation that leads the disadvantaged student to learn. We make a great deal of this policy at the University of Akron. The needy disadvantaged student does not have to pay tuition. He can take courses free of charge. He can use the learning laboratory free of charge, and he can borrow his textbooks free of charge from the textbook lending library. In many instances, we pay for his food and his transportation to the campus. We pay his parking fees and in many other ways indulge him as if he were a helpless child.

Is this good? Indefinitely no, but for the time being, yes. Our eventual goal is to help the disadvantaged student help himself to a vocational education. But before he can do this, he has to be helped. Were we to continue to help the disadvantaged student beyond the point where he needs help, then we would only succeed in developing a parasite, another dependent. This is not our intention. What we want to do and must do is to sell the disadvantaged student a vocational education.

This he must have if he is to succeed in a competitive, highly automated society. If we have to make the sale at cost or considerably below cost, then that is what we will do to get him started and to keep him going. We know that eventually the disadvantaged student will accept the proposition that the most functional motivation to learn derives from the learning tasks themselves, and from the ability finally to cope with what formerly appeared to be uncopable.

Pace the Learning Efforts of Your Students!

Ready or not, go ahead and enroll in freshman English or freshman math and let's see what you can do! This is the educational philosophy of too many college teachers. We grant that every student has the right to try himself out in a course that has no prerequisites as he comes to college through the open admissions door. We grant, also, that students have the right to fail as well as the right to succeed. But when we know that failure is practically inevitable, why must we push the disadvantaged student into failure deliberately by permitting him to do what we know he can't do. It makes much more sense to find out at what level of subject matter difficulty the disadvantaged student can function and then to help him proceed from there in small movements of learning growth to greater accomplishments.

This is where pacing of learning comes in. Some disadvantaged students can make progress quickly; others have to proceed at a snail's pace. The presentation of subject matter information to a class of disadvantaged students must, therefore, be multiple-pronged. No student should be asked to absorb more information at any one time than he is able to absorb. The subject matter information presented to disadvantaged students must be challenging enough to force them to improve upon past performance, but not so challenging that the students are unable to absorb the information. Every learning step that the disadvantaged student takes must match the student's academic powers to deal with that step.

Since no two disadvantaged students proceed at the same pace in their learning efforts, because of their disparate educational backgrounds, teachers of disadvantaged students must especially be careful in deciding when and to what extent a disadvantaged student is ready to take the next step in the learning sequence. The teacher must know what the student knows in a given subject matter area, and how well he knows it. The teacher must also know how willing the student is to add to his knowledge and how capable he is of understanding the newly acquired information. Next, the teacher must know how well the student can retain the information obtained, and to what extent he can use it to solve his different adjustment problems. All this the teacher of disadvantaged students must know for each of his students in order to set the most productive learning pace for every student.

Teach Concepts Rather than Facts!

The disadvantaged student has a paucity of subject matter background. Hence the absorption of new subject matter content is difficult for him and comes slowly. There is not enough factual information to build on. It is not so with concepts and ideas. If the concepts, and ideas presented to the disadvantaged student are concrete, simple and relevant to his own experiences, he can and will accept and absorb them.

By focusing teaching upon understanding of concepts and ideas rather than upon accumulation of subject matter content, the teacher provides the disadvantaged student with opportunities to perceive relationships, make discriminations, and draw inferences from his own concrete experiences.

To teach concepts rather than facts is not easy. The teacher who undertakes this must bear in mind that to begin with, only those concepts can be taught to disadvantaged students which can be readily translated into their own learning experiences. Thus a disadvantaged student can easily understand and deal with the concept of poverty because he can produce many detailed experiences from his own life relating to it. But he may find it next to impossible to deal with the concept of altruism because he has never been well off enough to be altruistic.

Also, in teaching concepts, the teacher must be able to organize learning experiences in such a way that they follow a sequential order where every preceding learning task becomes the foundation for the succeeding learning task. Sequential learning of concepts requiring a gradual upgrading in the difficulty of conceptual subject matter, is especially important in the teaching of abstract ideas such as loyalty, justice and courage.

Instead of bombarding the disadvantaged student with a lot of facts, we introduce him to concepts that are simple and meaningful to him. His own concrete experiences give the disadvantaged student the initial facts he needs to dress the concepts presented to him. Then as concepts are examined in depth, and students are provided with opportunities to perceive, to compare, to organize and integrate, they become ready to absorb facts which originally were alien to them. By a gradual sequential progression of building more difficult facts upon simple facts, the disadvantaged student makes concepts his own and by so doing, progresses in his learning.

Encourage Varied Activities While Teaching!

To encourage learning by active participation, the teacher must provide for a variety of auxiliary student activities as part of the learning process. Auxiliary learning activities are valuable to the disadvantaged student because they facilitate the initiation and maintenance of attention. Since the disadvantaged student's attention span is relatively short, anything that can attract and hold his attention helps his learning efforts.

Attention is generally considered to be involuntary, voluntary or habitual. Our goal with disadvantaged students is to arouse their involuntary attention - then train them to maintain voluntary attention so that in due time, after much practice, they can devote habitual attention to information and skills acquired through learning.

At the University of Akron, we have achieved this goal by permitting initiation of involuntary attention in several ways. Involuntary attention by way of activating the five senses is made possible by touching and manipulating learning machines, smelling fragrant bouquets of flowers, seeing films and film strips, hearing music and tape recordings, and tasting food and drink. The senses of touch, smell, sight, hearing and taste thus are naturals for both arousing and maintaining attention.

Our disadvantaged students can listen to mellow music as they are being tutored; they have many different kinds of learning machines from auto-tutor to perceptoscopes that they can use; they are surrounded by the aromatic fragrance of flowers in season which are brought in almost daily; they can listen to tape recordings and sound recordings and radio; they can look at television and video taped learning programs and munch on pastries and drink soft drinks at the same time.

By encouraging our disadvantaged students to use a variety of technological aids in their learning; by providing them with the opportunity of reading together, talking together, listening together, writing together and thinking together, we furnish them with the kind of controlled open-ended forms of conceptual and affective self-expression and communication that leads to successful learning.

Accept and Redirect Feelings and Emotions From Your Students!

Perhaps the most difficult of the eight injunctions that we recommend to teachers of disadvantaged students is the injunction that the teacher accept and redirect the student's feelings and emotions. Suppose a disadvantaged student says to you, his teacher, I love you! or I hate you! or I am afraid of you!

Obviously you, the teacher, cannot reject the proffered feeling or emotion. You have to accept it - accept it however, not as a personal gift but as feeling or emotion left in your keeping until it can be appropriately redirected. The psychiatrist does this all the time. So does the clinical psychologist, and so must the teacher of disadvantaged students.

To accept love, anger or fear in trust and know what to do with these emotions while they are in your keeping, requires professional training in psychotherapy. Every teacher who teaches, tutors or counsels disadvantaged students should have such training. The teacher, in short, must learn how to transfer emotion directed to herself from herself. Appropriate re-direction of emotion is accomplished through substitution, compensation or sublimation. The teacher himself acts as a catalyzer in the process of accepting feeling and emotion from his students and then re-directing them into appropriate channels. In so doing, the teacher assists the disadvantaged student once more in his learning efforts.

These then are the eight innovative means to effective teaching of disadvantaged students that we recommend for adoption:

1. Constantly inventory your students.
2. Use a shot gun approach in your teaching.
3. Be thankful your students differ in background.
4. Use incentives to motivate your students.
5. Permit your students to keep pace with themselves.
6. Concentrate on concepts in your teaching, not facts.
7. Use attention getters and sustainers in your teaching.
8. Accept the feelings and emotions directed to you by your students.

There are other strategies for teaching disadvantaged students, no doubt. However, the eight strategies discussed here can be regarded as the primary skills by means of which a teacher of advantaged students can become a teacher of disadvantaged students.